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INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2018
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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ MARKS ANNIVERSARIES WITH THREATS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT RICHARD DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez delivered combative televised speeches February 2 and 4 to commemorate his ninth anniversary in the presidency and the sixteenth anniversary of his unsuccessful coup. On February 2, Chavez accused Colombia of preparing a conflict with Venezuela, adding that the Venezuelan armed forces are on alert. He also urged the head of Venezuelan's telecommunications regulatory body to apply a "firm hand" against a TV network he accused of being "on the side of the Colombian oligarchy." On February 4, Chavez announced that Venezuela is ready to assist with the release of three FARC hostages (all former Colombian legislators) and asserted that many FARC hostages are really "prisoners-of-war." Chavez' speeches this year coincided with a national four-day Carnival weekend and therefore probably did not reach or have the desired effect on as many Venezuelans as he would have desired. End Summary.

Nine Years in Power

¶2. (SBU) President Chavez convoked a February 2 evening meeting of his cabinet and other senior military and civilian officials to listen to his televised address to the nation from the presidential palace. The government mandated that all national radio and TV broadcasters carry his speech ("en cadena"). Reflecting on the ninth anniversary of taking office, Chavez reviewed at length a series of charts to argue that his administration has markedly improved important social indicators. He also pledged to make further improvements in combating poverty and improving the country's education and health care systems.

¶3. (SBU) Chavez also asserted that Colombia is allied with the United States in a joint effort to attack Venezuela, adding that the Venezuelan military is consequently on alert. He claimed that Brazilian President Lula da Silva and Argentine President Cristina Fernandez both called him to express concern about bilateral tensions between Venezuela and Colombia. Chavez said intelligence sources in other, unspecified South American countries state that Colombia is planning "aggression" against Venezuela. He warned Colombia to avoid a conflict, noting that Venezuela's Sukhoi fighter aircraft can fire missiles from 200 kilometers.

¶3. (SBU) The Venezuelan president also indirectly threatened Globovision, a prominent opposition-oriented cable news

station. Chavez asked the new head of CONATEL, Venezuela's telecommunications regulatory agency, to apply a "firm hand" against "terrorism of the media." Chavez said one network is supporting the "Colombian oligarchy" in Venezuela's bilateral dispute with its neighbor and added that "a traitor cannot be the owner of a communications firm."

"The Day of Dignity"

¶4. (SBU) Chavez, clad in military uniform and his red beret, presided over a military parade at Paramacay Fort in Carabobo State during the late afternoon of February 4 to commemorate his failed 1992 military coup. After decorating a number of persons associated with the coup attempt, Chavez, flanked by Venezuela's senior military officers and several governors, addressed a large number of Venezuelan troops standing at attention before him. The government again mandated that all national radio and TV stations carry Chavez' "Day of Dignity" speech.

¶5. (SBU) Chavez exhorted the ARC to continue to act independently of the Colombian government, which Chavez said is "subordinate" to the United States government. The Venezuelan president also noted that his government stands ready to assist with the release of three former Colombian legislators who have been held hostage by the FARC for several years. He did not specify when such a release might occur. Chavez claimed Venezuela shares much of its western and southwestern borders with the FARC, not Colombia, noting that the FARC makes and enforces its own laws in areas that it controls. Chavez also said he considers many FARC hostages to be "prisoners-of-war."

Comment

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¶6. (C) Chavez' commemoration of his nine years in office and the sixteenth anniversary of his failed military coup coincided this year with a national four-day Carnival weekend, not exactly a propitious time for lengthy government ceremonies. Nevertheless, Chavez insisted in mounting his televised celebrations on the exact days as part and parcel of his personal annual efforts to make these dates part of the mythology of his "Bolivarian revolution." Judging from the stone-faced participants in both events, as well as the fact that his February 2 speech interrupted coverage of Venezuela's participation in the Caribbean Baseball World Series, we believe Chavez' speeches did not reach or had less than his desired effect on many Venezuelans. Chavez' saber-rattling with Colombia, however, continues to grab local headlines. It is also generating growing concern among the diplomatic community in Caracas, particularly as Chavez lends open rhetorical support for the FARC.

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